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Philip L. Frana

University of Central Arkansas

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Implementing Wikis in Honors Courses

PHILIP L. FRANA

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

Recently I have been thinking a lot about how to get from “me” and “you” to “we” in undergraduate honors courses. Typically in a collaborative learning activity students must demonstrate individual accountability, task commitment, and role fulfillment. Students are judged by their ability to grasp intellectual tools of the trade, share learning goals and outcomes, and reflect on peer or instructor performance, all of which constitute a valuable learning process.

My preference, however, is to teach project-oriented honors classes grounded in constructivist epistemology, where knowledge is assembled and transformed by students working with resource persons. In such courses, innovations emerge from collaboratively organized projects, and students accept primary leadership roles. Until the introduction of new digital technologies, this kind of collaborative process was limited in time and space to one semester, the confines of a classroom, and the class members themselves. The process was restricted and incomplete. Wikis provide a means to break away from these restrictions.

In 2006 I faced a dilemma. My class had ended, and the principal project we had created for ourselves still was not finished. *Honors Seminar in Oral History Methods and Practice* was designed to give students training and experience through interviewing a well-established “local leadership group.” I had left “group” undefined in my course syllabus, and, as honors students are wont to do, they proposed a highly ambitious project: conducting interviews with former President Bill Clinton’s leadership circle. In particular, they proposed interrogating the people who helped to create Little Rock’s Clinton Presidential Library and thus to breathe life back into the city’s crumbling downtown warehouse district.

Tapping honors alumni connections, we invited the former chairman of the Clinton Foundation—currently dean of the Clinton School for Public Service—to a meeting in our newly developed ethnography laboratory and peppered him with questions. Following this meeting, which revealed the complexity of our task, we wrote letters to key interviewees and lugged digital video recorders all over the city to gather first-hand accounts. We grumbled

through the painstaking transcription process and dumped everything into a poorly structured digital archive consisting of posts in forum threads.

By then it was May, and we were still a long way from the fully up-and-running, user-friendly archive we had envisioned for ourselves back in January. My hard drive bulged with 1,202,000 characters of information collected by the students in their background research. Several dozen potential interviewees were left untouched. We hadn't even interviewed Bill Clinton yet, though some of us had managed to press the flesh at a volunteer gala.

What to do? Not surprisingly, the students did not want to continue the class into the summer, and I soon found myself wondering: Is it possible to instantiate the complex knowledge base produced by an interpretive community of oral history interviewers, digital filmmakers, and photographers? Can you capture and provide good structure to past student experiences so that a different group of collaborators can continue to transform the research previously conducted? What online tools allow collective authoring over time so that knowledge creation is discursive, relational, and conversational?

In the midst of such queries, I stumbled across MediaWiki, a stripped-down, freeware version of the online application used by the folks who run Wikipedia. MediaWiki requires PHP 5.0, a web server, and a database server implementation of MySQL 4.0 or PostgreSQL 8.1. MediaWiki is easy to install, and, if Blackboard is available, built-in wiki software already exists inside the course shell.

In 2008 I had another opportunity to teach my oral history honors seminar. I built the course syllabus and my electronic textbook ("e-text") directly into the wiki's community portal. This time students chose to interview business leaders responsible for creating Little Rock's River Market, a revitalized urban district located next door to the Clinton Library. They then transformed the academic loose ends left by the previous class into a valuable set of linked wikipages. Fortunately, you don't need coding skills to edit a wikipage; you just hit the edit button and type. If you want hyperlinks to other pages (connected knowledge), you add [[double brackets]] around words. Then you press the save page button. That's it.

A wiki is not by definition a crowd-sourced, open-platform free-for-all. FranaWiki is password protected, and only those collaborators formally approved by the site administrator (me) are allowed to edit the pages. Students are prevented from editing the electronic textbook by an easily applied lock-out mechanism while some editable "current event" pages for organizing notes on future interviewees are reserved for student use. We eventually chose not simply to interview former contributors to the library and revitalization projects but also to engage them as collaborators at a distance, using them as a *de facto* advisory board and means for extramural evaluation. Our site,

recently renamed the Little Rock Renaissance Wiki (honors.uca.edu/wiki), currently has sixty-four collaborators, among whom are local urban planners, architects, and developers.

MediaWiki offers an elaborate built-in content-monitoring system that supplements and makes transparent the critical reading and revising of wiki pages by peers and advisors. Every author's contributions and modifications are logged and can be undone. If a page is moved, a redirect to its new location is automatically left behind. Users can communicate with one another by leaving messages on a special discussion page associated with each content page. These process-oriented aids enable students' grasp of the content, structure, and style of the resource as it develops from the bottom up; they also facilitate negotiating and taking responsibility for what gets written.

Today what was once just a byproduct of oral history interview preparation is now a stand-alone cultural resource. At 2,557 articles, Little Rock Renaissance Wiki is nearly as large as the state-funded *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. The goals of the two resources are dissimilar but complementary. The *Encyclopedia* favors tertiary articles by professional historians and centers on problems of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Little Rock Renaissance tries to build public knowledge by making new knowledge public. In future years I will be able to update the course textbook while wiki software automatically stores copies of each previous version for posterity.

The wiki way reduces barriers to group participation and makes projects scalable and sustainable so that several generations of my students necessarily work both with each other and with extramural evaluators in solving authentic puzzles. Wikis are one example of the way that digital technologies expand the honors classroom, creating a new and different kind of time and space for collaborative learning projects. The digital age can thus transform, enhance, and broaden the quality of honors education.

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SUGGESTED READING

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The author may be contacted at
pfrana@gmail.com.